

# *America Becoming:*

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## The Growing Complexity of America's Racial Mosaic

Data from the 2000 census confirm that America is becoming more racially and ethnically heterogeneous. High rates of immigration, declining birth rates among White Americans, and relatively higher birth rates among Hispanic Americans have poised America on the threshold of becoming a nation with no ethnic majority: By 2050, if not sooner, no group will constitute more than 50 percent of the population. Given its often-turbulent history of race relations, how will America fare with such a multi-racial, ethnically complex populace?

To examine racial and ethnic trends and their implications, the National Research Council, part of the National Academy of Sciences, assembled a distinguished group of scholars and experts on race and ethnicity. The two-volume compendium of studies that emerged from this gathering, *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*, provides a comprehensive assessment of current research and analysis on American racial and social dynamics, with recommendations for ongoing research and implications for future policy. The collection offers a framework for understanding the 2000 census results. It portrays an America that is making progress in its efforts to reduce inequalities and barriers to opportunity. Troubling disparities across groups nevertheless persist. This policy brief presents the key findings of the report and their implications for policy and research.

### **STUDYING RACE IS "NOT ROCKET SCIENCE. . . IT'S HARDER."**

Analysts attempting to study racial issues encounter formidable methodological hurdles. The concept of "race" itself presents a moving target. The 19th-century view of race as a biological category has been soundly discredited. As Raynard Kington and Herbert W. Nickens point out in their discussion of health status, "Race does not reflect meaningful biological or genetic distinctions." Scientists now define race in sociocultural and psychological terms.

Other methodological difficulties also pose challenges.

- There have been wide variations in how racial categories are applied and interpreted. Death and birth reports, for instance, have often relied on eye-witnesses' subjective interpretations about the subjects' racial and ethnic identities.
- Racial categories continue to evolve, making historical comparisons difficult and unreliable. For example, at one time immigrants from southern European nations, including Greece and Italy, were not classified as White, though later they were.
- America's main ethnic categories are not mutually exclusive. Hispanics, for instance, may also be White, Black, or Native American. Nearly 60 percent of Hispanic Americans report themselves to be White.
- Research and data collection on racial issues have been shaped by America's Black-White dynamic. As a result, data on other groups are often sketchy and, where available, too recent to shed much light on long-term trends.
- Because of the fluidity of racial categories and measures, and the growing number of people with a multiracial identity, future projections about America's racial composition must be viewed with caution. In the 2000 census, people were allowed for the first time to check more than one racial category to describe themselves. The categories and the measures themselves are likely to continue changing over time.

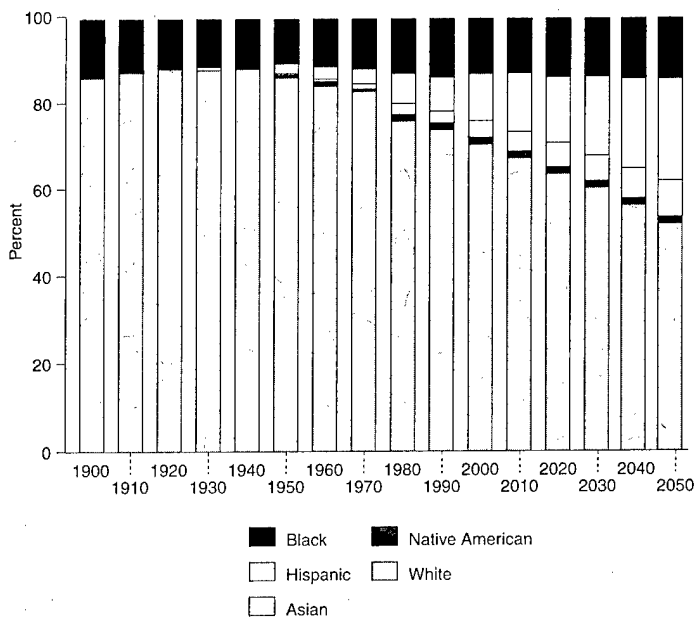
"Race is not rocket science," notes Christopher Edley in the foreword to *America Becoming*. "It's harder than rocket science."

It would be mistaken, however, to conclude that because race and ethnicity are largely constructed and

reinforced by social norms, they are somehow artificial or unreal. Race and ethnicity are defining realities because they are (1) deeply rooted in the consciousness of both individuals and groups and (2) firmly fixed in our society's institutional life. As editors Neil J. Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell note in their introduction, "These facts steer us toward a conclusion that is at once true and paradoxical—i.e., that [quoting from James Smith's essay on labor market trends] 'while biological notions of race have little meaning, the society itself is extremely racialized.'"

## AMERICA'S ETHNIC DIVERSITY IS INCREASING

Despite the difficulties of precise measurement, demographic trends clearly show that America's already diverse population will become even more so. Ethnic minorities constitute a growing share of the population (see Figure 1), and heterogeneity within all ethnic groups is growing.



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Figure 1—The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of the United States

Changes in the U.S. population mix stem largely from immigration. Thirty-eight percent of the Hispanic population and 61 percent of the Asian population are immigrants. Not only has immigration remained steady at high

rates for decades, but a greater percentage of immigrants are choosing to remain in the United States.

Nearly every U.S. ethnic population has undergone significant changes in recent decades, but the main story in U.S. demographic trends over the past 20 years is the explosive growth among Hispanic Americans, from 6.9 million in 1960 to over 35 million in 2000, and projected to grow to 55 million by 2020. Relatively high birth rates among resident Hispanic Americans, combined with high levels of migration from Latin America, account for this change. This group remains ethnically heterogeneous. Mexican Americans constitute about 65 percent of Hispanic Americans and are concentrated heavily in the Southwest. Puerto Ricans, the second-largest group, are clustered primarily in Northeast urban areas, especially New York. Cuban Americans, the third-largest, are concentrated almost exclusively in Florida. Growing groups of immigrants from Central and South America have taken up residence in other urban areas, including New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Two dominant and apparently antithetical trends tend to define the Hispanic population: on the one hand, a drive toward conventional assimilation; and on the other, a pattern of poverty, isolation, and possible cultural alienation from American life. Because of their numbers, the direction Hispanics take will have major implications for the country as a whole.

The Asian American population has also undergone dramatic changes in the last three decades. Since 1970 and the end of immigration limits originally imposed in 1924, the Asian American population has grown from 1.5 million to nearly 12 million in 2000 (including mixed race), and is projected to grow to 20 million by 2020. Once largely U.S.-born and consisting predominantly of Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans, the Asian American population is now predominantly foreign-born and spread across several different nationalities. As the sources of this immigration have diversified, this population has also become increasingly heterogeneous. The major sending countries include Vietnam, Korea, American Samoa, India, Thailand, the Philippines, and China. Asian Americans are only beginning to crystallize their presence as a force in America's political and cultural landscape.

The Native American population also increased sharply between 1960 and 2000; this is partly due to fertility rates above the national average and also to changing racial classifications in the census. Probably because of ethnic consciousness-raising that began during the 1960s and '70s, many more Americans now identify themselves

as Native Americans. Overall, the Native American population has rebounded from a nadir of about 275,000 in 1900 to around four million today (including mixed race). This is the group most affected by the option in the 2000 census to check multiple categories: about two million checked only Native American and another two million checked that and something else.

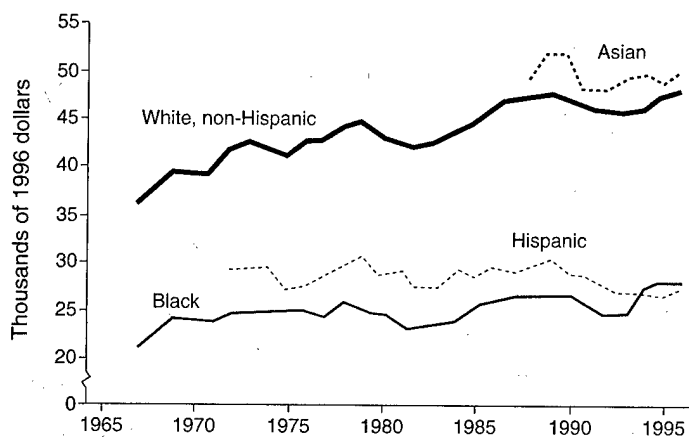
Although the Black population has remained relatively stable by comparison, it has also undergone shifts. After several decades of net migration from the South to large cities in the North and West, Black Americans began returning to the South in 1970. Furthermore, the Black population is also becoming more ethnically heterogeneous. Census estimates project that by 2010 as many as 10 percent of Americans of African descent will be immigrants from Africa or the Caribbean.

### DESPITE RECENT PROGRESS, MANY DISPARITIES PERSIST

Despite real progress in recent decades in closing gaps between the ethnic majority and minority populations, there remain troubling disparities in many areas. Race and ethnicity continue to correlate strongly with well-being in America.

#### Economic Status

Continued and widening gaps in family income and wealth indicate that the economic situation of most minority populations is not improving. Black family income (see Figure 2) stagnated between 1970 and 1993, although there were signs of increases between 1993 and 1996. Hispanic family income decreased in the 1990s. Meanwhile, family



SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

Figure 2—Median U.S. Family Income, 1965–1995

income increased among non-Hispanic Whites, largely because of growth in the female labor force. In contrast to other minority populations, Asian Americans are faring relatively well. They have the highest median family income of any group, though again variations appear within the group, depending on immigrant status.

#### Labor Market Issues

Access to good jobs is key to economic status. Long-term statistics show that wage disparities appear to be an enduring feature of the American economic landscape. From 1980 to 1995, median weekly earnings for all men, adjusted for inflation, decreased but the earnings gap between Black and White men held constant. Since 1985, when statistics on Hispanic wages were first tracked, Hispanic men's earnings have fallen in both absolute and relative terms. Meanwhile, among women there has been a slow growth in wages since 1980, although the earnings of White women have outpaced their Black and Hispanic counterparts to the point that White women now average higher median wages than Black men.

#### Education

Many measures of educational achievement show that disparities across different populations are narrowing. Mathematics scores, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, show ongoing gains, especially among Black children. High school completion and dropout rates for Blacks and Whites are slowly converging. However, the educational achievement gap between Hispanic Americans and other groups is starting to widen.

Two other areas of concern have also emerged: differential college completion rates and computer usage. College completion rates in recent years have increased sharply for Whites and modestly for Blacks, and declined slightly for Hispanics. Because economic rewards for a college education have increased in recent years, this trend has contributed to the earnings gaps noted above. In the area of computer usage, White children were far more likely to have access to home or school computers than their Black and Hispanic counterparts.

The stagnant educational trends among Hispanics reflect to some extent the immigrant percentage of that population. If second-generation Hispanic children follow typical American patterns, the educational attainment of Hispanics will soon begin to increase.

## Health Status

Despite substantial improvements in health across all U.S. ethnic populations throughout the 20th century, stubborn disparities between the majority population and most ethnic groups still exist.

Black Americans continue to experience relatively poorer health than Whites. Life expectancy for Blacks improved steadily throughout the past century, drawing within 5.8 years of Whites in 1984. After that, however, the longevity gap began to widen again because of increases in Black mortality from homicide, HIV, diabetes, and pneumonia. A variety of factors contributed to these trends, including institutionalized discrimination in the health-care system, lack of access to health care, differences in health-related behavior, and varying levels of stress.

As in many other areas, data on the health of ethnic populations other than Black or White Americans were not widely collected prior to the 1970s. Existing data suggest that Hispanics have enjoyed relatively good health by some measures, but their health status has varied considerably within their ranks. The health of Puerto Ricans, for example, is comparatively poorer than that of Cuban Americans and Mexican Americans. Interestingly, studies have shown that the health of immigrant Mexicans is better than that of U.S.-born Mexican Americans. The picture also varies among groups of Asians and Pacific Islanders, though many Asian subgroups enjoy relatively good health. Native Americans continue to experience poor health relative to Whites, though this gap has narrowed considerably in recent years.

Children's health is a gauge of any society's general well-being. Infant mortality, a key indicator, has decreased among all U.S. populations since 1960, but continues to reveal glaring racial and ethnic disparities. Important disparities also appear in other indicators of health problems and risks, including the prevalence of low birth weight, iron deficiency, exposure to violence, elevated lead levels, and prenatal alcohol exposure.

## Housing and Neighborhoods

The spatial distribution of different racial and ethnic populations suggests that segregation persists in virtually all of the nation's housing markets, from large urban areas to rural counties. The most extreme geographic segregation is unique to Black Americans and is apparently unrelated to economic status and not explained by preferences about where to live, thus strongly suggesting the persistence of racial discrimination. In contrast to poor

Whites, who typically live dispersed among better-off families, poor Blacks, because of residential segregation, are concentrated in poor neighborhoods. As a result, residential segregation contributes to the problems of these areas, including high concentrations of poverty, educational failure, joblessness, out-of-wedlock parenthood, crime, and high mortality. In addition, the increasing importance of suburbs as economic and residential centers has drained resources from inner cities and contributed to a declining political will to address poverty and urban decline, both of which disproportionately affect ethnic minorities.

## Crime and Criminal Justice

Disparities in the criminal justice system provoke powerful emotions for many and constitute perhaps the most controversial and divisive aspect of race relations in America. Current statistics are startling in their extremity. Black Americans are arrested, convicted, and incarcerated at far higher rates than Whites or any other ethnic or racial group. In the 1990s, the chance that a Black male born in the United States would go to prison for a felony sometime in his lifetime was close to 30 percent, while the chance for a White male was 4.4 percent. Moreover, in some cities, over half of Black males in their 20s are under control of the criminal justice system (that is, incarcerated, on parole, or on probation). Between 1980 and 1995, the Hispanic percentage of the nation's prison population more than doubled, rising from 7.6 percent to 15.5 percent. At the end of 1995, nearly two-thirds of all state and federal prisoners were either Black, Hispanic, or a member of another non-White racial group.

## LOOKING AHEAD

A central question for public policy in the coming years will be how to build on the progress of past decades while addressing harmful disparities across ethnic populations and reversing negative trends. Tackling these issues while striking an equitable balance across the potentially competing needs of different ethnic populations is likely to pose an immense challenge for America in the 21st century.

## Some Implications for Policy

One approach to addressing disparities across ethnic populations could be to identify areas of consensus. Two of these clearly emerge from *America Becoming*.

Surprisingly, the first area is affirmative action. Often considered a public policy issue on which Whites and

other minorities are hopelessly divided, affirmative action turns out to be an area of basic agreement. All groups apparently share unease about overt racial preferences but are willing to support outreach programs as well as programs that benefit the disadvantaged. While there is still disagreement about how such programs should be implemented, there is good evidence that Americans share a deeply rooted national consensus on the ideals of racial equality and integration.

Another area of consensus is the value of investing in children's health. A salient fact of America's changing demographic profile is that a growing proportion of American children will belong to ethnic minority populations. Health and nutritional problems in childhood, which disproportionately affect minority children, contribute to poorer behavioral and developmental outcomes, which in turn can limit educational performance and are associated with higher rates of long-term underachievement and dysfunction. These developments would mean that America is losing valuable potential and human capital. And even though a growing proportion of children come from minority backgrounds, the majority of poor American children today are White, which suggests that all Americans stand to benefit from early investments in the health and development of children.

More contentious but no less important areas are those in which research suggests that significant forces of discrimination continue to operate: housing, health care, and criminal justice. More vigorous enforcement of civil rights law is called for here, as well as attention to policies, such as the war on drugs, that do not have a racially biased intent but are discriminatory in practice.

## Some Implications for Research

*America Becoming* identifies several promising areas for further research. Perhaps the most basic gap in the research literature involves a lack of data on the full range of America's ethnic populations, including data disaggregated within racial and ethnic groups by social class and income. Because race and class are intertwined in America, more precise data will allow richer studies of trends over time and better insight into the play of class and ethnic variables.

In keeping with a policy focus on children noted above, it will also be important to assess the effects of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, which are likely to fall disproportionately on children, especially among ethnic minorities. It will be worth examining whether the reforms are having the desired effects of promoting entry into the workforce without having unintended consequences, such as increases in child poverty and illness.

Finally, another important research challenge will be to broaden the contexts in which American racial and ethnic dynamics are understood. Although White Americans are often used as a yardstick for measuring the progress of other ethnic populations, in many respects they are far from an ideal population. They lag some American populations groups—notably Asian Americans—in educational achievement, longevity, and family income. Similarly, they lag the populations of many developed countries in other measures. Looking at American racial trends in international contexts could enrich Americans' understanding of their social environment writ large and help define more common goals for policy action.

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*RAND policy briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. Unlike most RAND policy briefs, this brief describes work conducted outside RAND, in this case by the National Research Council and documented in America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences, eds. Neil J. Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press), Volume I, 530 pp.; Volume II, 492 pp. Volume I ISBN (hc): 0-309-06495-3; (pb): 0-309-06838-X. Volume II ISBN (hc) 0-309-06839-8; (pb): 0-309-06840-1. Copies of the volumes are available from the National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20418 or from the press's Web site at [www.nap.edu](http://www.nap.edu).*

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